Murray State University

Fanny Fern:

Forgotten Feminist from the Nineteenth Century

Cady Stribling

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Dr. Gina Claywell

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Abstract

Literary critics have long forgotten Fanny Fern, a nineteenth century author and columnist whose sassy satire took America by storm. She challenged societal issues and expectations in the 1800s through her entertaining writing and unconventional life. Fern's own struggles with family, poverty, and grief gave her a personal and nonconforming perspective. As the first American woman columnist, Fern broke barriers on gender expectations. Further, her articles provided realistic views on societal issues with feisty, humorous characters, and she gave a voice to the voiceless. Therefore, Fanny Fern stands as one of the most valuable American writers of her time.

Fanny Fern: Forgotten Feminist from the Nineteenth Century

Sara Willis Parton, better known for her pseudonym Fanny Fern, was born in America in the nineteenth century when social and political norms were being scrutinized. American literature had begun to highlight the exploitation of the marginalized groups such as the working class and women. Similar to her surroundings, Fern's story consists of both poverty and prosperousness. Fern climbed out of adversity and proved herself a worthy writer by using her literary talents to raise awareness for the hardships she experienced. Unlike other women writers of the nineteenth century, Fern dared to discuss mistreatment of workers, sexism, and other pressing concerns that capitalist America chose to ignore. Due to this willingness to venture into controversial topics and successful advocacy for women's rights and educational reform, Fern was one of the most influential women writers of the nineteenth century.

According to "Fanny Fern, Performative Incivilities and Rap," Fern was so widely read and well received that many newspapers fought for her to be on their staff as a columnist (Warren 17). She became the first American woman newspaper columnist and highest paid newspaper writer of the nineteenth century (Warren 17). In her early career, her style tended to be melancholy and serious, most likely the result and representation of the difficulties that she experienced throughout adulthood, such as poverty (Warren 18). The transition from somber tones to sassy satire was the stylistic choice that won over her audience and set her apart. In her columns, Fern stood up for workers' rights and gender equality; this bred controversy and "marked her status as a hot commodity" (Homestead 212), and she profited a great deal. The newspapers she wrote for were so "distressed at the thought of losing their star contributor" (Warren 104) that they continued to raise her pay so she would continue to write for them. By

the end of 1852, Fern earned four dollars a column for two columns at the *Olive Branch* and five dollars for one column at the *True Flag* (Warren 104). The *New York Ledger* then offered her "an unprecedented $100 for each column of a serialized story" (McMullen) making her the highest paid newspaper writer in the country. Other women, such as Lydia Maria Child, Jane Cannon Swisshelm, and Margaret Fuller "had been correspondents or editors, but Fern was the first to be a columnist in the twentieth-century sense of the word: a professional journalist paid a salary to write a regular column expressing the author's personal opinions on social and political issues" (Warren 104).

Writing about these social and political issues resonated with the population that experienced the hardships about which she wrote, and because they faithfully read her columns, she became very successful (Warren 17-18). Her popularity soared with the penniless and oppressed. Her supporters were the "shop girls, seamstresses, housewives, the factory operatives, overworked farm wives, the exhausted mothers of many children, the widows, the abandoned wives" (Warren 17). Not only did Fern speak to her audience, she spoke on behalf of them. Ironically, the voiceless allowed Fern to express her voice. The witty, charismatic character that Fern took on in her articles captivated audiences and drew attention to accurate depictions of harsh conditions the afflicted faced every day. "Her power base was the powerless" (Warren 18). During the nineteenth century, if a woman were to write, there were strict societal expectations as to what could be written. Like most disciplines in history, privileged white men dominated the writing and publishing industries. Lack of representation, however, began to lessen as women got a foot in the door of the literary world. It was a step in the right direction, but women were still expected to write in a proper manner about appropriate topics that met societal standards. They were confined to boxes of femininity and delicacy, and any content or stylistic choice

outside of this box was scrutinized. Fern received a lot of backlash for speaking on behalf of the oppressed. In the eyes of lofty society, she had no business discussing themes of equality. But her decision to do so made her incredibly successful and raised awareness of these issues. Many other female writers during this time period were unwilling to write about such controversial topics. This is another reason Fern's writing was so influential and established her as one of the most recognized voices in America (McMullen). Even Hawthorne, who loathed female authors, enjoyed reading Fern's writing.

For the decade from 1850 to 1860, eight novels by American writers were considered best-sellers (Frederick 231). Only three out of the eight were written by men. *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, two novels written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, were on the list, as well as *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville (Frederick 231-232). These three novels sat stagnant for many decades before picking up circulation. Interestingly, the remaining five novels that were written by women "sold hundreds of thousands of copies — as Hawthorne observed — almost immediately after publication" (Frederick 232). *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner centers around a young female narrator on the path to strengthen her Christian faith through life's sufferings; *The Curse of Clifton* is a romance novel by Emma Southworth, following a domestic heroine protagonist; *Tempest and Sunshine* by Mary Jane Holmes is a romance novel with a passive, feminine narrator that takes place in Kentucky; *The Lamplighter* by Maria S. Cummins has an intricate plot and "positive religious didacticism" (Frederick 232-236). The fifth was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the only novel that dealt with a highly controversial topic, in this case slavery. In January of 1855, Hawthorne famously wrote to his publisher and friend William D. Ticknor while in England:

> "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash-and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the 'Lamplighter,' and other books neither better nor worse? - worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000" (Frederick 231).

Hawthorne specifically calls out *The Lamplighter* for its dreariness. His attitude toward women novelists was sexist, but his frustrations with the monotony of their contents were understandable. Despite Hawthorne's complaint, he read Fern's *Ruth Hall* and wrote in a letter that she "writes as if the Devil was in her" and her fiery passion "is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading" (Wood 3). Fern's vivacious writing had to be a breath of fresh air in comparison — especially if we have Hawthorne's word for it.

Fern's writing about social and political issues was looked down upon by many of society, but the cause of so much controversy was the manner in which she wrote. Her columns took on energetic, opinionated personas that encouraged audience members to disregard gender roles and societal norms. This call away from conventionalism by using brilliantly humorous wit was the reason that Fern became so popular, why newspapers were terrified to lose her, and why she stands as one of the most prominent women writers of her time. For example, *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature* provides a few of Fern's columns: "Hints to Young Wives" is the perfect example of the feisty narrator who resonated well with readers. In the article, a strong-minded Fern chastises "foolish" women for doting after their husbands (Parton 1107). She calls for them to cease preserving their husband's affection, or he will lose interest in

them. Straightforwardly spilling what Fern dubs as gospel, she writes: “Just so long as a man isn’t quite as sure as if he knew for certain, whether nothing on earth could ever disturb your affection for him, he is your humble servant” (Parton 1107). The conversational aspect makes it feel as though Fern taps the wrist of a good friend or family member. She concludes that if “you have made the discovery that you were married for a sort of upper servant or housekeeper” (Parton 1107) then there is no more love in the marriage. Fern ends with a personal anecdote of finding out that Mr. Fern has been unfaithful; she uses the repetition of “dropped” to signify no more residual feelings, looks at herself in the window, and concludes “*F-a-n-n-y F-e-r-n! if you — are — ever — such — a — confounded fool again’ — and I wasn’t*” (Parton 1108). This last sentence is concurrently vulnerable and humorous. It is compelling that Fern uses herself as an example to convey to the audience that they should learn from these types of situations and take action to avoid getting hurt again. The punctuation represents Fern’s spontaneity and emphasis and adds to the humorous literary uniqueness.

The foundation of Fern’s articles was the social or political issues, which were layered with her opinion through a flashy style and literary techniques, and finally coated with clever charm. This individuality was extraordinary — even in the midst of all the wordsmith prodigies during the 1800s — adding justification to her substantial influence during the time period. Her circulation, though widespread, wasn’t received well by everyone. Her divisive articles took a few years to become profitable and caused chaos within the community. Critiques labeled Fern’s autobiographical novels as “betraying and lowering her feminine nature” (Wood 4), thus reinforcing an orthodox society. Even her own brother, a successful writer and editor for a New York magazine, refused to help Fern when she was a single, impoverished mother due to the “indecency” of her columns (Warren 18). Instances like these that happened in Fern’s life

heavily shaped the views and opinions that appear in her writings. The gregarious voice in her work deeply contrasts with her childhood experiences. It is interesting to speculate as to whether traditional upbringing caused her to sway into a more unconventional lifestyle. No matter the cause, Fern settled into the nonconformity about which she preached.

As a child, Fern and her eight siblings grew up with a strict Calvinist father. He was a deacon, "a sober man whose somber religiosity placed a pall on the household" (Warren 6). In Fern's autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*, she describes him as an "inhibiting and gloomy figure in the family," and every time he walked into the room, everyone huddled "like timid sheep in a corner" while their mother "glanced nervously at the door" (Warren 6). Despite the frigidity of the father, Fern had a close relationship with her mother Hanna Parker Willis. She even credits her mother with her literary talents: "If there is any poetry in my nature, from my mother I inherited it" (Warren 6). Fern appreciated the gentleness and patience that her mother radiated in contrast to her father's hostile attitudes, as well as the "strength and forbearance in the face of insult and harsh treatment" (Warren 7). She described a specific occasion from childhood in which her father unwarrantedly insulted her mother with "murderous syllables," but her mother recovered quickly, and her voice had an "added sweetness" to keep the peace (Warren 7). It was then that young Fern realized what life meant for a woman (Warren 7). Most likely, seeing the patriarchal abuse of her mother shaped Fern's future outlook on gender equality. Her alertness to injustices in society could have largely stemmed from things she saw at home. The descriptions of issues in Fern's writings are accurate and realistic — a feature that resonated well with readers and added to her success — which is undoubtedly another result of her home life.

Further, Fern experienced hardships in adulthood throughout her many marriages and impoverishment. Fern happily enjoyed life with her first husband Charles Eldredge and had three

daughters in this marriage (Lautner 1105). Throughout her columns, she maintained realistic portrayals of domesticity, especially in the face of financial hardship and struggles of raising children. She respected motherhood and — just as she saw with her own mother — all of the sacrifices that went along with it. However, despite Fern's love for children, she reveals the realities in "The Invalid Wife" as she describes a "feeble" baby in a mother's arms and juxtaposes the joys of a family with the weariness of motherhood (Warren 61-62). She did not accept "the sugarcoated vision of marriage and motherhood that convention dictated" (Warren 62), which is the tone that carries over to her writing. Unfortunately, her husband's business actions landed the family in monetary struggles that Fern was left to deal with after his death (Lautner 1105). In addition to her first husband leaving them in financial disaster, her beloved mother and eldest daughter died, plummeting Fern into one of the lowest points in her life (Lautner 1105-1106). Fern lived the unconventional lifestyle that she wrote about and found herself in a second marriage that ended promptly; her lack of resources also resulted in the custodial loss of her daughter (Lautner 1106). However, once Fern established herself as a worthwhile columnist, she got her daughter back and married a third time to a man eleven years her junior (Lautner 1106).

Along with being the highest paid American columnist, Fern published two novels, children's books, and hundreds of newspaper columns (McMullen). Her work earned her a reputation as an activist for women's rights and independence, educational advancement, and labor reform. In total, she had a 21 year career as a highly successful columnist (McMullen). Of course, in the nineteenth century, many important women writers were published who fought for equality — especially considering the first wave of feminism and the abolitionist movement — such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony, and Jane Austen. Fanny Fern is not an author

who is typically recognized, nor does she have much of a public fan base like the aforementioned women whose popularity outlived them. Yet, it is remarkable to see the reasons as to why certain literary figures outlast others. At the time, Fern seemed to be just as popular as any other female writer — she was the highest paid columnist due to mass circulation in American and Europe — yet people now have hardly read her works. She is not more skilled or experienced than fellow women activists during the time, but it is surprising to observe the lack of recognition she receives nowadays comparatively. Fern also advocated for social and political reform and spoke from experience. She deserves more recognition for paving the path for other women writers in the nineteenth century due to her advocacy for equality, and her milestone accomplishments in the newspaper industry.

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